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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000374

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SUBJECT: LUKASHENKO FOUND, LOOKS ILL

REF: MINSK 348

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4(B,D)
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¶1. (C) Summary: Lukashenko has been found. After a two-week absence from the public eye, and after missing all the events surrounding the tenth anniversary of the Union State Treaty, Lukashenko appeared on state television on April 4. In two short segments an atypically weary and soft-spoken Lukashenko was shown advising his Foreign Minister and greeting the Kazakh Ambassador. Lukashenko appeared to have lost weight and rarely made eye contact with his interlocutors, instead fidgeting with his hands throughout both clips. A number of rumors are circulating. Most claim Lukashenko suffered a stroke or heart attack, and some state that he has been quietly removed from power, while remaining the public face of the regime, by members of his inner circle. Meanwhile, the GOB and its media have made little mention of Lukashenko's April 8 inauguration. The new Lukashenko certainly did not appear like a victorious leader who just won a "thunderous victory." End summary.

Batka Lost, Found

¶2. (SBU) Aleksandr Lukashenko last appeared on television on March 20, when he gave a live press conference dedicated to the March 19 presidential election. On March 28, state TV showed a short clip of Lukashenko speaking to a small number of senior staff (reftel). However, the United Civic Party's Ludmila Gryaznova told Ambassador on April 4 that UCP sources had reliably dated that clip to mid-December 2005.

¶3. (U) On April 4, state television broadcast two short clips of Lukashenko. One clip had him meeting the outgoing Kazakh Ambassador. The second showed him speaking with Foreign Minister Sergey Martynov and recently recalled Belarusian Ambassador to Poland Pavel Latushka. During the second clip a tired and quiet Lukashenko rejected western criticism of the election and claimed Belarus would not yield to any foreign pressure, but would instead follow its own laws and goals. He particularly denounced recent Polish actions against Belarus, but claimed the GOB would take care of its Polish minority. In the first clip, Lukashenko spoke unenthusiastically about Kazakh-Belarus relations. In both clips Lukashenko appeared to be tired, looked like he had lost weight (sunken cheeks and baggy suit), and had heavy make-up under his eyes. Throughout both clips Lukashenko displayed none of his typical energy, instead he mostly looked down and played with his hands. Contrasted with the stories of energetic bureacra
ts solving the nation's "problems" (such as tinted car

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windows), Lukashenko looked more like the deflated loser of the recent election, rather than someone who achieved a "thunderous victory," receiving supposedly 83% of the vote.

¶4. (U) The Head of the Presidential Administration, Gennady Nevyglas, on April 3 tried to persuade journalists that all is well with Lukashenko by reporting that the president was in good health, had played hockey on Saturday, and "won a resounding victory." He also claimed that inauguration planning for April 8 was in full swing. Nevyglas' statements were treated with skepticism as there was no visual proof of Batka's Saturday hockey match and the PA press service kept mum on any details about the April 8 inauguration.

Rumors that Lukashenko Sick

¶5. (C) A number of rumors continue to circulate in Minsk to explain Lukashenko's disappearance and poor appearance. On April 3, Ambassador met with the Serbian Ambassador to Belarus (protect). The Serb relayed "confirmed" information from his sources in Moscow that Lukashenko had suffered an aneurysm in either the heart or brain, and that one of Lukashenko's presidential aircraft had flown to Moscow the previous week to bring a team of doctors back to Minsk.

¶6. (C) The UCP's Gryaznova told Ambassador on April 4 that Lukashenko had a "head problem" that necessitated treatment, specifically a series of shots. Gryaznova claimed that Vladimir Nestiuk, formerly Lukashenko's press secretary and now a leader in opposition candidate Aleksandr Kozulin's camp, is stating that Lukashenko had a heart attack. However, Gryaznova stated her suspicion that Nestiuk is a Lukashenko provocateur assigned to feed the opposition misinformation. Therefore she opined the regime wants people

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to believe Lukashenko only suffered a heart attack while the truth is much worse. Gryaznova added that the Kremlin sent Boris Gryzlov to Minsk on April 3, ostensibly to take part in Union State festivities, but actually to scout out a suitable replacement for Lukashenko. Gryaznova speculated that State Control Committee head Anatoly Tozik or the head of a large state enterprise, such as Belneftekhim, are the most likely possibilities.

¶7. (C) Independent political analyst Vladimir Podgul told Poloff on April 3 that he heard from a senior GOB bureaucrat that Lukashenko hosted a meeting with the heads of his security services on March 21 or 22. Podgul claimed Lukashenko began by quietly thanking the BKGB, MVD, and Presidential Security for their efforts during the election period. Suddenly, Lukashenko began to shout obscenities and yell that the security service heads were all traitors turning against him. After a few minutes he snapped back and again quietly thanked everyone. Once again he began screaming and throwing things at his guests. Podgul stated Lukashenko's own security detail restrained him and took him to the Navinka asylum outside Minsk for treatment. Podgul does not know whether to believe this story, or if this is a cover to explain why Lukashenko's inner circle are now running the country. In either case, Podgul stressed that Lukashenko's failure to participate in any of the events, in Minsk or Moscow, celebrating the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Union State Treaty is proof that something has happened to Batka.

A Quiet Inauguration

¶8. (U) The GOB originally scheduled Lukashenko's inauguration for March 31, and sent invitations to select diplomatic missions (excluding the U.S. and EU). This inauguration was postponed without explanation, and will now be held on April

18. The GOB has again invited certain diplomatic missions, including Japan, Serbia and Turkey, but not the U.S. or EU. Other than a terse announcement of the date, the GOB propaganda machine has made little hoopla about the inauguration. So far the opposition does not have set plans for a demonstration, but opposition members tell us that youth groups will certainly coordinate a "spontaneous" protest somewhere in the city via text messaging and the internet. Post has heard from a number of contacts that those activists being released from jail are eager to continue their fight for democratic change, and so will likely protest the inauguration.

Comment

19. (C) Whatever has happened to Lukashenko, he did not appear on April 4 the leader he was before the elections. He seems to have lost most of his energy and charisma during his two-week absence from the public eye. His nearly two-week absence and poor physical appearance on April 4 are not indicative of a confident politician recently re-elected in a supposed landslide. Most rumors refer to Lukashenko suffering from illness, likely caused by stress. If that is the case, the steady avalanche of negative statements coming from the West, and Moscow's sudden post-election insistence on charging Belarus more for natural gas (septel), might have contributed to his "illness." A number of rumors also claim that a physically unfit Lukashenko has been removed from real decision-making and is now only the public face of the regime. Post has no evidence to support or refute these rumors. Rumors of Lukashenko's poor mental state have been a constant over the 12 years of his rule. But his two-week absence after his "victory" is unusual even by his bizarre standards. It maybe that the success of the opposition in holding demonstrations on March 19 and after, after all the efforts the regime made to prevent them, may have unnerved Lukashenko. Regardless of the reasons for his absence and current poor physical appearance, the "new" Lukashenko does not appear to be starting his third term on a strong footing.

We will closely monitor how Batka looks and acts on April 8 and afterwards.

Krol